

Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

Johor (Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Johor Bahru, Muar, Mersing, Seribuat Archipelago and Endau-Rompin National Park.

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Johor

06, 07 / POPULATION: 3.3 MILLION / AREA: 19,984 SQ KM

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Why Go?

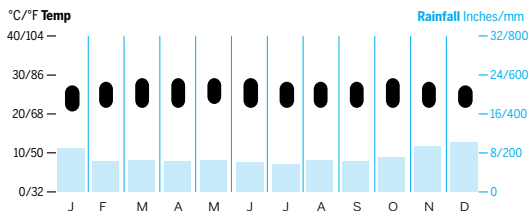
Linked to Singapore at the tip of the Asian continent, Johor is the southern gateway to Malaysia. While it's the most populous state in the country, tourism has taken a back seat to economic development, leaving some great off-the-beaten-path destinations.

Some of Malaysia's most beautiful islands are found in the Seribuat Archipelago, off the state's east coast. These attract Singaporean weekenders but few others. It's prime dive territory, and you'll find similar corals and fish that you'll find at popular Tioman Island but without the crowds. You'll also find the low-key white-sand beaches which fringe gleaming turquoise waters and wild jungles.

For more adventure head to Endau-Rompin National Park. This jungle offers the same rich flora, (very elusive) fauna and swashbuckling action that visitors flock to experience at Taman Negara in Pahang, but in a much more pristine, un-touristed setting.

When to Go

Johor Bahru



Nov–Feb Avoid the monsoon season – head to Rawa for the surfing season.

Mar–May The water's visibility is at its best for diving.

Jun–Jul Pulau Besar closes for Expedition Robinson. Expect high temperatures everywhere.

Johor Bahru

☑07 / POP 1,371,000

After years of being criticised as a dirty, chaotic border town, Johor's capital Johor Bahru has been repaved and replanted and is suddenly a lively, appealing place to hang out. Even the sketchy watch salesmen and down-and-out sidewalk lurkers who congregated along Jln Tun Abdul Razak have been

swept away by an increased police presence. Just off this main drag you'll find bustling food hawkers, interesting old architecture and wide, clean sidewalks. The city still has more crime compared with most Malaysian towns, but there's a real urban buzz and some surprisingly cosmopolitan corners to explore.

JB is connected to Singapore by road and rail across a 1038m-long causeway, across



Johor Highlights

- 1 Swimming, diving and beach bumming it to the max in the **Seribu Archipelago** (p237)
- 2 Cooling off in the sensational waterfalls of **Endau-Rompin National Park** (p239) after hiking through dense jungle
- 3 Discovering the colonial backstreets of **Johor Bahru** (p228) and realising that the city is outgrowing its bad reputation
- 4 Strolling the laid-back historic-architecture laden streets of **Muar** (p234)
- 5 Admiring the sultans' treasures at the **Royal Abu Bakar Museum** (p229) in Johor Bahru
- 6 Sweating your way up lofty **Gunung Ledang** (p235)
- 7 Having a drink or four at one of Johor Bahru's hip **watering holes** (p232)

which Singaporeans flood for shopping and excitement on weekends and holidays. However, other than just for changing trains, planes or buses, few foreign travellers linger here even though it has great potential as a budget base for Singapore.

As one of the five 'economic zones' of the Iskandar development project that will radically change southern Malaysia over the next decade, JB is in for more than a makeover. Danga Bay, a 720-hectare area, 5km from the Causeway, is poised to be a financial and commercial centre with the lofty hopes of being as scenic and enticing as Sydney's Darling Harbour, although for now it's a bleak sprawl of construction.

Dangers & Annoyances

Although travelling in JB is generally safe, visitors should be alert to motorcycle-riding bag-snatchers and, as in any city, avoid walking alone down dark alleyways. If you have any troubles call the **police hotline** (☎225 6699).

Sights

Heritage District

ARCHITECTURE

(Map p230) Wandering around the heritage area between Jln Ibrahim and Jln Ungku Puan is a real highlight of JB. Walk past colourful, old shophouses filled with sari shops, barbers, Ayurvedic salons, gorgeous temples, and old-style eateries.

Royal Abu Bakar Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p230; ☎223 0555; Jln Ibrahim; adult/child US\$7/3; ☉9am-5pm Sat-Thu, ticket counter closes 4pm) The marvellous Istana Besar, once the Johor royal family's principal palace, was

built in Victorian style by Anglophile sultan Abu Bakar in 1866. It was opened as a museum to the public in 1990 and displays the incredible wealth of the sultans. It's now the finest museum of its kind in Malaysia, and the 53-hectare palace grounds (free entry) are beautifully manicured.

At the time of research the museum was getting an extensive, two-year remodel, but will no doubt have reopened by the time you're reading this, with the – possibly increased – entrance fee payable in ringgit.

Sri Raja Mariamman Devasthanam

HINDU TEMPLE

(Map p230; 4 Jln Ungku Puan) This beautiful Hindu temple, with ornate carvings and devotional artwork, and a tall, brightly painted *gopuram* (tower) entrance way, is the heart of JB's Hindu community.

Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque

MOSQUE

(Jln Gertak Merah) The stunning whitewashed walls and blue-tiled roofing of the Sultan Abu Bakar features a mix of architectural influences, including Victorian. It was built between 1892 and 1900 and is quite rightly hailed as one of the most magnificent mosques in the area. Sadly, non-Muslims cannot enter the building itself.

Chinese Heritage Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p230; 42 Jln Ibrahim; RM10; ☉9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Well laid-out exhibits chronicling the history of Chinese immigrants in this part of the Malay peninsula. Learn how the Cantonese brought their carpentry skills here, while the Hakkas traded in Chinese medicines and the Hainanese kick-started a trend in coffee-shops, which lasts to this day.

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF ISKANDAR

Started in 2006 and expected to be completed in 2025, the Iskandar Development Region stretches from Johor Bahru to Senai/Kulai in the north, Tanjung Pelepas at the west and Pasir Gudang at the east. The aim is for the region to become an international metropolis and liberal trade port not unlike China's Shenzhen and Hong Kong.

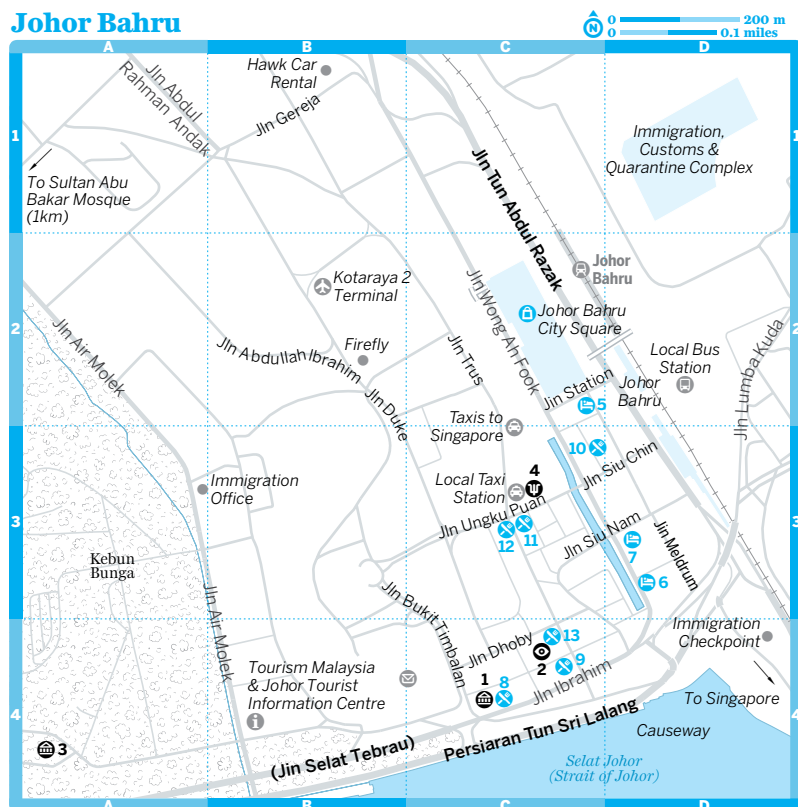
The administrative capital, Kota Iskandar, is literally being built from scratch (with a Moorish-Andalusian architectural theme) and was officially opened by the Sultan of Johor on April 16 2009.

The project has been harshly criticised by ex-PM Mahathir Mohamad, who has warned that the higher cost of living in the region, as well as the fact that most of the land is being sold to foreign investors (many Singaporean), will force out Malaysians. In the end, he prophesises, Iskandar will only be 'an extension of Singapore'.

The Iskandar project has been backed by more recent PM Najib Razak, who believes that growth and foreign investment can only be beneficial for Malaysia and its people. The hopes are that the wealth of Iskandar will spill over to the rest of the country and bring progress to the entire region.

Johor Bahru

JOHOR JOHOR BAHRU



Johor Bahru

📍 Sights

- 1 Chinese Heritage Museum C4
- 2 Heritage District C4
- 3 Royal Abu Bakar Museum A4
- 4 Sri Raja Mariamman Devasthanam C3

🏨 Sleeping

- 5 Citrus Hotel C2
- 6 JA Residence D3
- 7 Meldrum Hotel D3

🍴 Eating

- 8 Annalakshmi C4
- 9 Hiap Joo Bakery & Biscuit Factory C4
- 10 Medan Selera Meldrum Walk C3
- 11 Restoran Nilla C3
- 12 Restoran Nilla C3
- 13 Roost Juice & Bar C4
- Roost Repurposed Recycled (see 13)

🏨 Sleeping

Hotel rooms mentioned here include private shower or bath, unless stated otherwise.

The main zone of cheap and low-bracket midrange hotels clusters on and around the relatively ambient Jln Meldrum, in the centre of town. Budget price tags are high for Malaysia, and most places ask for a room

deposit of RM30 or more that's returned to you when you check out. More midrange business-oriented hotels hover in the lively area around KSL Mall, where you'll find tons of good eating options and shopping.

Many hotels inflate prices on Friday, Saturday and Sunday by about 10%.

LEGOLAND!

Got kids? Opened in September 2012, Southeast Asia's first **Legoland** (☎597 8888; www.legoland.com.my; Medini, Nusajaya; adult/child/senior RM140/110/110; ☀10am-6pm) offers 31 hectares of fun with over 40 rides and attractions. Nearly everything is hands on, and it's not just about the bricks. Expect to crawl around, pull yourself up a tower with ropes, ride a dragon-coaster and shoot lasers at mummies. The centrepiece is Minland where you'll find regional landmarks like the Petronus Towers and Singapore's Merlion built in miniature out of Lego.



Thistle Johor Bahru

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎222 9234; www.thistle.com.my; Jln Sungai Chat; r from RM240; 🍷🍷🍷) Overlooking the Straits of Johor, the hotel is the poshest city option this side of the Causeway. It's in a class above the rest with marble bathrooms, a lovely curving swimming pool and an airy, light ambience, although the location near Danga Bay is a little out of the way. Thistle is located about 4km from the town centre, just off the main road, Jln Lingkaran Dalam.

Meldrum Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p230; ☎227 8988; www.meldrumhotel.com; 1 Jln Siu Nam; dm RM40, s/d with shared bath RM70/80, r with bathroom from RM90; 🍷🍷) All options here are air-conditioned, clean, spacious and freshly painted, and the rooms have TVs, free drinking water and kettles. It's worth upgrading to a RM100 superior room with attached bathrooms and free Wifi – these are downright plush. Dorms are air-conditioned but cramped, and filled largely with local men.

Grandeur Palm Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎599 6000; www.palmresort.com; Jln Persiaran Golf; r from RM472; 🍷🍷🍷) Only a three-minute drive from Senai International Airport (28km from Central JB), this resort is a far cry from the city's hubbub. Alongside the elegant accommodation there are nearly unlimited activities available from golf to paintball, an Olympic-sized pool and ATV trails. Afterwards chill out at the on-site Le Spa.

Citrus Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p230; ☎222 2888; www.citrushoteljb.com; 16 Jln Station; d/f from RM150/209; 🍷🍷) Rooms are small but clean with white walls and bright coloured accents. Breakfasts are tasty, staff are helpful and the location just next to JB City Square couldn't be better.

KSL Hotel & Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎288 2999; www.kslresorts.com.my; 33 Jln Seladang; r from RM247; 🍷🍷🍷) This massive, lively family-friendly place, sitting atop one of JB's best shopping malls, puts you within steps of food courts, a cinema, mini golf and the resort's own giant swimming pool. Rooms are modern with black furniture and Japanese-style toilets in the bathrooms. The views over JB's sprawl get better the higher up you go.

JA Residence

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p230; ☎221 3000; www.ja-residencehotel.com; 18 Jln Wong Ah Fook; r RM130-250; 🍷🍷🍷) Right in the heart of JB, this is a comfortable, clean and modern high-rise hotel offering good value for money. Its cream coloured paint and polished wood interiors have some design flair and the staff are really friendly. Angle for a room on the upper floors, with views over the causeway.



Eating

Whatever you think of JB, you can't complain about the food. The streets here (try the area around KSL City Mall) sizzle with some of the country's best seafood, as well as local specialities including a local, curry-heavy version of laksa.

Roost Juice & Bar

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p230; Jln Dhoby; mains RM8-28, juice from RM7.90; ☀12-4pm & 6pm-12am Mon-Sat, 6pm-12am Sun) JB's most chilled spot uses recycled wood, bottles and more to create a cafe/bar that feels like someone's (very hip) living room. And the food is great too. Try the Hainese noodles, fish n' chips, mutton ribs or Nyonya fish fillets and finish it off with fresh juice or a cold beer.

The same folks also run **Roost Repurposed Recycled** (Map p230), an excellent salad (from RM8.90) and frozen yogurt (from RM6.90) cafe just a few doors down.

Hiap Joo Bakery & Biscuit Factory

BAKERY \$

(Map p230; 13 Jln Tan Hiok Nee; rolls & cakes RM1-4; ☎8am-6pm) For over 80 years this little bakery has baked delicious buns, cakes and biscuits in a charcoal oven just as the founder had done before in his native Hainan, China. The coconut buns and bread rolls are ready by 12.30pm, and sold out by 3pm. The banana cake is baked all day, with the last batch done by about 2.30pm.

Annalakshmi

INDIAN \$

(Map p230; ☎227 7400; 39 Jln Ibrahim; set meals by donation; ☎11am-3pm Mon-Fri; 🍴) An authentic vegetarian Indian restaurant run by volunteers of the Temple of Fine Arts, with the motto of 'eat what you want and give as you feel'. Meals are a set and the ambience is classy.

Restoran Nilla

INDIAN \$

(Map p230; Jln Ungku Puan & Jln Trus; mains from RM2; ☎7am-10pm; 🍴) An excellent banana leaf place with two nearby outlets – the other is just around the corner, on **Jln Ungku Puan** (Map p230; Jln Ungku Puan). For some of the best chicken you've ever had, ask for the 'vegetarian chicken.' It is in fact tofu but it's so good you'll hardly believe it.

Medan Selera Meldrum Walk

HAWKER \$

(Map p230; Medan Selera Meldrum; meals from RM3; ☎dinner) Every late afternoon, the little stalls crammed along this alley (parallel to Jln Meldrum) start frying up everything from *ikan bakar* to the local curry laksa. Wash down your meal with fresh sugar-cane juice or a Chinese herbal jelly drink. Nothing here is excellent but it's all good.



Drinking

The Zon

BAR, CLUBS

(☎221 9999; The Zon Ferry Terminal) Three words: duty free booze. About ten bars and clubs surround the courtyard of this happening spot. Hip Roost (p231) has an outlet here for drinking in funky recycled decor while Dolce and Cabana are probably the most fun places for dancing.



Shopping

JB promotes itself as a major shopping destination. Singaporeans do come across for shopping – petrol and groceries – but for most brand goods Singapore has better prices and a better range.

The best shopping centres are:

KSL City Mall

MALL

(www.kslcity.com.my; 33 Jln Seladang) Food and bars to a Tesco, clothing and home wares.

GETTING TO SINGAPORE: JOHOR BAHRU TO SINGAPORE

Getting to the border From JB Sentral you can clear immigration and take a bus or taxi across the Causeway to Singapore. From central JB, board your bus after clearing Malaysian immigration just before the Causeway – you can buy your tickets onboard. There are also frequent buses between JB's Larkin bus station, 5km north of the city, and Singapore's Queen St bus station. Most convenient is **Causway Link** (www.causewaylink.com.my; from JB/Singapore RM2.50/\$\$2.40; ☎6.30am-midnight), running every 10 minutes. Registered taxis to Singapore depart from the Plaza Seni Taxi Terminal in the centre of town, with taxis to Orchard Rd or Queen St terminal costing around RM60. Local city taxis cannot cross the Causeway. Alternatively, **Trans Star Cross Border Coaches** (from JB/Singapore RM7/\$\$7; ☎5am-9pm) run hourly between the Kotaraya 2 Terminal in Johor Bahru and Singapore's Changi International Airport.

At the border All buses and taxis stop at Malaysian immigration. You'll need to disembark from your vehicle with your luggage (and ticket), clear immigration and reboard. Vehicles then stop at Singapore immigration; again, you'll clear immigration with your luggage, before getting back in your vehicle for the last leg to Queen St bus station. The next train stop south of JB Sentral is Woodlands CIQ in Singapore, which marks the end of Malaysia's railway network. If catching the train, you'll get out to clear customs on the Malaysia side before reaching Woodlands.

Moving on At Queen St there are buses, taxis and an MRT (light rail) system that can take you almost anywhere you need to go in the city. ATMs are handy at Singapore immigration and Queen St if you need to change your currency.

See p543 for details on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

Johor Premium Outlets

(www.premiumoutlets.com.my) Enjoy discounts of 25% to 65% at 80 big-name brand stores like Gap and Nike. The mall is in Kulai, about 25km from JB.

MALL

Tebrau City Shopping Centre

This is the biggest shopping centre in Johor. It's got a massive Jusco plus pretty much everything else you can think of. It's about 15 minutes drive from the Causeway.

MALL

Plaza Pelangi

(Jln Tebrau) A mishmash of everything and very popular.

MALL

i Information

ATMs and banks are everywhere in the central areas. Moneychangers infest Jln Wong Ah Fook, and have competitive rates

Immigration Office (☎223 8400; khidimat-johor@imi.gov.my; Jln Setia Tropika, Kempas) About 15km north of the Causeway.

KPJ Johor Specialist Hospital (☎Emergency 220 7505, 227 3000; www.kpj Johor.com; 39B Jln Abdul Samad) A squeaky clean, state-of-the-art, private hospital.

Tourism Malaysia & Johor Tourist Information Centre (☎223 4935; www.johortourism.com.my; CIQ Immigration Complex & 3rd fl, Jotic Bldg, 2 Jln Air Molek; ☉9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Tourism Malaysia has two offices in JB, the most convenient being the one at the CIQ Complex, right after you pass immigration from Singapore.

i Getting There & Away

Air

JB is served by the **Senai International Airport** (☎599 4500; www.senaiairport.com) in Senai, 32km northwest of JB.

AIRLINE OFFICES

AirAsia (☎1300-889 933; www.airasia.com; Tune Hotel) Has low-cost flights to KL, Penang, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu, Sibul and Miri.

Firefly (☎603-7845 4543; mezzanine fl, Persada Johor International Convention Center, Jln Abdullah Ibrahim) Flies to Kuala Lumpur's Subang Airport and Kota Bharu.

Malaysia Airlines (☎334 1011, 331 0036; mezzanine fl, Persada Johor International Convention Center, Jln Abdullah Ibrahim) Flights to Kuching and Kuala Lumpur with easy connections to a variety of destinations. Prices are much lower than from Singapore.

Bus

Larkin bus station is a frantic sprawl of hawker stalls, restaurants, clothes shops and other

outlets as well as numerous bus companies. There's also a left luggage counter (little/big bag RM3/4 per day; ☉7am-10pm).

JOHOR BAHRU BUS FARES

Destination	Price	Duration
Butterworth	RM62.60	9hr
Melaka	RM17	2½hr
KL	RM31	4hr
Mersing	RM12	2hr
Kuantan	RM20	5hr
Kuala Terengganu	RM33	8hr

Taxi

JB's main **long-distance taxi station** (☎223 4494) is at the Larkin bus station (5km north of town); there's a handier terminal on Jln Wong Ah Fook. Regular taxi destinations and costs (share taxi with four passengers) include Kukup (RM80), Senai Airport (RM50), Melaka (RM280), KL (RM460) and Mersing (RM160).

Train

Three daily express trains leave from the sparkling JB Sentral train station in the CIQ complex, running to KL (6.30am, 2.56pm and 8.25pm). The line passes through Tampin (for Melaka), Seremban, KL Sentral, Tapah Rd (for Cameron Highlands), Ipoh, Taiping and Butterworth. The line bifurcates at Gemas so you can board the 'jungle train' for Jerantut (for Taman Negara), Kuala Lipis and Kota Bharu.

i Getting Around

To/From Senai International Airport

Senai International Airport, 32km northwest of town, is linked to the city centre by regular shuttle buses (RM8, 45 minutes) that run from the bus station at Kotaraya 2 Terminal.

A taxi between the airport and JB is RM60, taking 30 to 45 minutes, depending on traffic.

Bus

Local buses operate from several stops around town, the most convenient being the stop in front of Public Bank on Jln Ah Fook. From Larkin bus station bus 39 goes into Central JB (RM1.80).

Car

Car hire in JB is considerably cheaper than in Singapore, but check that the hire firm allows cars to enter Singapore. Car hire prices begin at around RM153 per day; prices are inclusive of insurance and tax. Many rental companies hire cars from Senai International Airport.

Hawk Car Rental (☎224 2849; Suite 221, 2nd fl, Pan Global Plaza, Jln Wong Ah Fook)

GETTING TO INDONESIA: JOHOR BAHRU TO PULAU BATAM & PULAU BINTAN (RIAU ISLANDS)

Getting to the border There are several daily departures to Batam (one way RM69, 1½ hours) and Tanjung Pinangon Bintan (one way RM86, 2½ hours), part of Indonesia's Riau Islands. Ferries depart from the ZON Ferry Terminal (for schedule details see www.zon.com.my/ferry.html), which is serviced by several buses from downtown Johor Bahru. Additional boats depart from Kukup, southwest of JB, to Tanjung Balai on Karimun (three times daily, RM130) and to Sekupang, Batam (twice daily, RM165); see www.ferrytuah.comoj.com for schedules and reservations. Buses travel to Kukup from Johor Bahru (RM7, 1½ hours) and KL (RM26, 3½ hours). A taxi from Johor Bahru to Kukup is RM80.

At the border You'll be charged a RM10 seaport tax and stamped out of Malaysia before you board the boat in JB; from Kukup the fee is RM25 per person. From the Riau Islands there are ferry connections to Sumatra, Indonesia.

Taxi

Taxis in JB have meters, and drivers are legally required to use them. Flagfall is RM3, with an average trip costing RM10. Taxis can be hired at around RM35 per hour for sightseeing.

Muar

006

A lethargic riverside town, languorously Malaysian in mood and with the feel of a bustling Chinatown, Muar was historically an important commercial centre but today it's a very sleepy backwater. It makes for an off-the-beaten-path (though not very action-packed) stop between Melaka and Johor Bahru.





The graceful **colonial district** by the river turns up several buildings of note. Walk around the area and look out for the customs house, the courthouse, the high school (built in 1914) and Masjid Jamek, a Victorian fantasy in much the same style as JB's Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque.

Sleeping & Eating

Muar is known for its Nonya-style *otak-otak* (fish cakes) and satay breakfasts. You'll find hawker stalls on Jln Haji Abu just off Jln Ali.





Hotel Classic

HOTEL \$\$

(0953 3888; 69 Jln Ali; r RM125-230;    ) Classy rooms here have complimentary newspaper, coffee- and tea-making facilities and satellite TV, and are the best in town. It's an amazing deal that would cost twice the price in a more touristy town.

Hotel Leewah

HOTEL \$

(0953 5995, Jln Ali 952 1605; 44 Jln Ali & 75 Jln Arab; d without/with air-con & bathroom RM35/48;    ) Leewah comprises two separate yet nearby buildings: the Jalan Ali hotel is smaller and in an older building while the Jln Arab location is sprawling and has the friendliest reception you may find in Malaysia. The owners love children, and the hotel attracts a lot of families. All rooms are simple, ageing and clean.

Getting There & Away

Regular buses to JB (RM16, 2½ hours) and KL (RM18, 2½ hours) depart from the Muar long-distance bus station by the river. Buses to/from Melaka (RM6, one hour), and Gunung Ledang/Segamat (RM5, one hour) operate from the local bus station. The taxi station is just to the right of the bus station.

Mersing

007

This busy, compact fishing town has everything that travellers passing through on their way to the islands might need: cheap internet, OK sleeping options, grocery stores, cold beer and a pharmacy. The river is clogged with colourful fishing boats, but beyond the riverfront there's not much to explore.

Tours

Several places around the port work as booking offices for islands in the Seribuat Archipelago and Tioman Island, and can also arrange packages.

Omar's (Map p236; ☎799 5096, 019-774 4268; Jln Abu Bakar) at Omar's Backpacker's Hostel is the best option for backpackers, and offers day-long Seribuat island-hopping speedboat tours (RM100 per person; minimum four people) and a two-day, one-night Overland Tour (per person RM350 all inclusive; minimum four people) to Endau-Rompin National Park.

Sleeping

You may end up spending a night or two in Mersing waiting for ferries (due to weather or the tides).

Avoid arriving in Mersing during the Chinese New Year and other holiday periods, as midrange hotels can be booked solid.

Hotel Embassy

HOTEL \$

(Map p236; ☎799 3545; 2 Jln Ismail; d/tr/q RM45/55/65; ⓂⓈ) This is a fabulous choice compared with the other cheapies in town, and is a great place to clean up and get back to reality after bumming it on island beaches. All rooms are huge, bright, have cable TV, air-con and attached bathrooms.

Teluk Iskandar Inn

B&B \$\$

(☎799 6037; www.iskandarinn.com; 1456 Jln Sekakap; r incl breakfast RM140-200; ⓂⓈⓉ) With a lovely garden sloping all the way down to the beach, this well-groomed spot is quiet and secluded, 4.5km south of town. The two-person rooms are large and airy. The owners

can prepare Malay meals by arrangement. The hotel is on the left side of the road as you head east away from Mersing.

Omar's Backpackers' Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(Map p236; ☎799 5096, 019-774 4268; Jln Abu Bakar; dm/d RM15/30; ⓂⓈ) At this tiny, social backpacker's pad very near the jetty, your experience will depend on Omar's variable mood. Reservations are recommended during the peak season.

Hotel Timotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p236; ☎799 5888; www.timotel.com.my; 839 Jln Endau; s & d incl breakfast from RM150; ⓂⓈⓉ) Just across the bridge over the river, this is a fading, business-style hotel with excellent service. Doubles are clean, spacious and have satellite TV.



Eating

Seafood stalls (Map p236) open up nightly near the bus station along the river.

Loke Tien Yuen Restaurant

CHINESE \$

(Map p236; 55 Jln Abu Bakar; mains RM3.50-15; ⓂⓈ lunch & dinner) Mersing's oldest Chinese restaurant is one of the friendliest, and busiest places in town. You may have to wait for a marble table to enjoy the deliciously prepared prawn and pork dishes. The specialty, whole steamed fish that you'll see all the locals eating, isn't on the English menu so ask your server.

WORTH A TRIP

GUNUNG LEDANG NATIONAL PARK

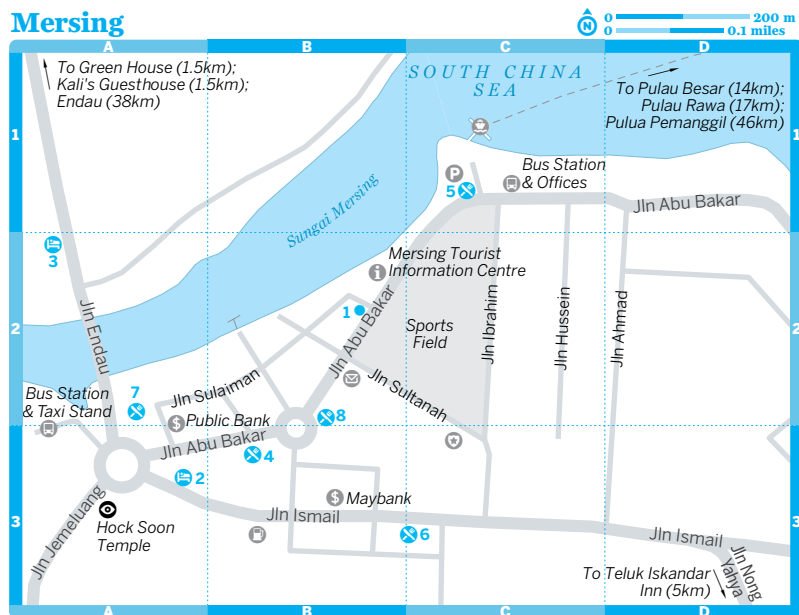
According to legend, the highest mountain in Johor, Gunung Ledang (also called Mt Ophir; 1276m), is the fabled home of Puteri Gunung Ledang, a mythical princess whose presence is said to still permeate the jungle slopes. This mountain is extremely popular with Malaysian and Singaporean groups but few foreigners visit the area. It's a very demanding – yet rewarding – two-day return trip from the National Park Office to the summit.

There are several camp sites (RM10 per night) along the way up the mountain. Also note that most camp sites and accommodation book out over the weekends – plan your trip on a weekday or reserve well in advance. Pre- and/or post-trek you can stay in one of the **park's accommodation options** (☎963 1030; www.johorparks.johordt.gov.my; Jln Muar; camp sites RM10, dorm RM25, chalets from RM75), or at the more comfortable **Gunung Ledang Resort** (☎06-977 2888; www.ledang.com; Jln Segamat, sales office BT 28, Sagil, Tangkak; cabins RM50, standard/deluxe tw RM150/250; ⓂⓈⓉ) a few kilometres down the road.

There's a park entrance fee of RM3 and an additional daily hiking fee of RM23. Mandatory guides bookable through the park's website cost RM140 per day. To get to the park take a bus or train to Segamat then hop on a local bus to Segil (RM5, 45 minutes), ask to get off at Gunung Ledang.

Mersing

JOHOR MERSENG



Mersing

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Omar'sB2

Sleeping

- 2 Hotel EmbassyA3
 3 Hotel TimotelA2
 Omar's Backpackers' Hostel(see 1)

Eating

- 4 Loke Tien Yuen RestaurantB3
 5 Port Café & BistroC1
 6 Restoran Al-ArifC3
 7 Seafood StallsA2
 8 Xiang Guo Bakery & Cake HouseB2

Restoran Al-Arif

INDIAN \$

(Map p236; 44 Jln Ismail; mains around RM6; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍴) Serving up *roti canai* (flaky, flat bread; 70 sen), *roti telur* (roti with an egg; RM1.60), nasi goreng (fried rice; RM3.50) and vegetarian options.

Xiang Guo Bakery & Cake House

BAKERY \$

(Map p236; Jln Abu Bakar; cakes from RM1, pizzas from RM22; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷🍷) A lovely place to chill out in the air-con with a meal (pizzas, Malay-style noodles, rice

dishes and more), a coffee and something sinful like tiramisu or rich cheesecake.

Port Café & Bistro

WESTERN \$\$

(Map p236; Jln Abu Bakar; mains RM12-28; ☺lunch & dinner) A little open-air bar and eatery right at the jetty, with surprisingly good Western grub like pizzas (from RM24) and grilled chicken salads with balsamic dressing (RM12). The bar serves beer, wine and cocktails and there's live music some nights.

Information

Mersing Tourist Information Centre (Jln Abu Bakar; ☺Mon-Sat 8am-5pm) On the road to the pier, stop in for helpful info, bus schedules and pamphlets.

Getting There & Away

Most buses as well as long-distance taxis depart from the bus station near the bridge on the river, although a few long-distance buses also leave from bus company offices near the pier. Some buses will also drop you off at the pier when you arrive in Mersing if you ask nicely. For buses to Cherating, travel first to Kuantan.

MERSING BUSES

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency
Johor Bahru	RM13	2½hr	2 daily
Kahang	RM7	1hr	3 daily
KL	RM40	5½hr	5 daily
Kuala Terengganu	RM34	9hr	2 daily
Kuantan	RM17	5hr	2 daily
Melaka	RM25	4hr	3 daily
Singapore	RM16	3hr	2 daily

Taxi destinations and costs (per car) include Johor Bahru (RM160), Kuantan (RM220) and Pekan (RM150). Local buses run to Endau (RM5, 45 minutes). For boats to Sibul Island, take a taxi to Tanjung Leman (RM70).

Seribuat Archipelago

📍07

A cluster of 64 islands scattered off the east coast of Johor, the Seribuat Archipelago is a constellation of some of Malaysia's most beautiful islands. Most people only know of Pulau Tioman, the starlet and largest of the group, which is actually a part of Pahang. This leaves the rest of the archipelago as far less-visited dots of tranquillity.

Divers can expect to see excellent coral and an array of marine life: butterfly fish, parrot fish, barracudas, giant clams and more. The waters around the archipelago are frequently whipped into foam during the monsoon from November to February, so ferry services can be patchy, especially during the high monsoon (November and December)

Visitors to the Seribuat Archipelago (and Pulau Tioman) should purchase a **Marine Parks entry ticket** (adult/child RM5/2) at the jetty in Mersing.

PULAU BESAR

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Easy to get to and perfect for a day or two of serious beach lounging, Pulau Besar's long white-sand beach is fronted by a veritable swimming pool when the sea is calm. If you tire of vegging out, there are trails to more hidden beaches and plenty of jungle to explore. That said, the coral isn't great here and there is no dive operator, so you'll have to spend your water time frolicking in the sandy-bottomed turquoise water or snorkelling along the scattered bits of reef.

You can visit Pulau Besar on a day trip by hopping on the resort's shuttle boats. At the time of research there were no public boats although there have been some in the past – inquire at the Mersing jetty for options.

Sleeping & Eating

The island's resorts are all situated along the beach on the west of the island. All have restaurants and provide transfers to/from Mersing for guests for around RM95 return.

Mirage Island Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(📞799 2334; www.mirageislandresort.com; chalets RM190-550) Cheaper digs are in stylish A-frames while the more expensive options are in huge, louvered wood chalets. All exude a tropical-colonial charm, the staff is young and fun and there's a bar and pool table in the restaurant area.

Aseania Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(📞019-736 1277; www.pulaubesar.net; chalets incl breakfast from RM300; 🍽️🍷) Rooms are big,

SURVIVING EXPEDITION ROBINSON

It will seem a little ironic while you're sipping your cocktail on a white sand beach, but other visitors to your island paradise might have munched on bugs and scrounged for water. This is because the Seribuat Archipelago is the location of *Expedition Robinson*, the original reality TV show that inspired *Survivor*. The program first aired in 1997 and the sets now host several groups (for different versions of the show) from countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and South Africa.

Base camp is on Pulau Besar, while many of the rougher 'survivor' locations are on the smaller, more remote islands. The Robinson TV crew begins setting up around April and filming takes place around June and July. During these two months Pulau Besar's hotels are shut to the public. You can however still make a daytrip to the island by hitching a ride with one of the many crew boats going back and forth to the mainland. Enquire at the Pulau Besar hotel offices at the Mersing jetty.

PULAU TINGGI

About 10 kilometres northeast from Pulau Sibu Besar, jungle-clad Tinggi is an impressive sight when seen from a distance – it's an extinct volcano (*tinggi* means 'tall') whose 600m-high cone creates a dreamy silhouette. Most resorts offer day trips around the island which involve excellent snorkeling and a trek to a beautiful waterfall.

The island supports three village populations: Kampung Tanjung Balang, Kampung Pasir Panjang and Kampung Sebirah Besar. The main place to stay on the island is the overpriced but beautifully located **Tad Marine Resort** (☎722 1777; www.tadmarineresort.com; two-night packages incl meals & transfers from RM690 per person; 🍷🍷) that caters mostly to Singaporean divers.

clean and have dark-wood interiors, while the service is stellar and the jungle pool, surrounded by a stylish wood deck, is a shady alternative to the beach.

PULAU SIBU

☎07

Apart from Tioman Island, this cluster of several islands (**Pulau Sibu Besar**, **Pulau Sibu Kukus**, **Pulau Sibu Tengah** and **Pulau Sibu Hujung**) is the most popular destination in the archipelago – particularly with expat families living in Singapore. The bulk of the accommodation is on Pulau Sibu Besar, a tiny island around 7km and 1km wide. Its main attractions are the good diving and even better beaches.

Tiny Pulau Sibu Tengah, which was once a Vietnamese refugee camp, is home to sea turtles that crawl ashore in July to lay their eggs. **Batu Batu** (www.batubatu.com.my; d incl breakfast & transfers from RM750; 🍷🍷🍷), a private, upscale resort was being completed here at the time of writing. The resort has partnered with Wild Asia (www.wildasia.org) to run turtle conservation projects.

Boats for Pulau Sibu do not depart from Mersing, but from the jetty at Tanjung Leman around 30km south of town. There are no public boats you'll have to organise transport with your resort (included in package prices).

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

All the following rates are per person and include full-board and boat transfers unless otherwise specified.



Rimba Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎012-710 6855; www.resortmalaysia.com; chalets from RM220 per person) Welcome to a super chilled-out beachy paradise on Sibu Besar, with comfy thatched huts all overlooking the island's best swimming and snorkelling beach. Spacious digs are quite stylish with

canopy mosquito nets, cushion-clad lounging spaces and sunken semi-open air bathrooms.

Guests from the other resorts are often lured here by the lovely white beach and loungable deck bar. There's a dive centre and massage hut, and the staff are delightful.



Sea Gypsy Village Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎799 3124; www.siburesort.com; A-frames RM180, chalets RM215, family chalets for 2 adults & 2 children RM680) This Sibu Besar resort is one of the best, most affordable places to relax with kids in Malaysia. Special children's meals are served throughout the day; there's a fun kids club, a mini playground and even an ingenious-worm composting system for ecological nappy disposal. The beach is better for playing in waves than for swimming.

Huts are dark but beds are comfortable and most units have a terrace, bathroom and fan. A-frames close to the jungle are the cheapest options. There's also a dive centre and plenty of activities on offer.

Sibu Island Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎222 5155; www.sibu islandresort.com.my; 1-night packages for 2 people incl breakfast from RM520; 🍷🍷🍷) On isolated Pulau Sibu Tengah, this relatively plush resort has all the mod-cons and good snorkelling. There's a full spa, dive centre, tennis courts and a ropes course for team-building corporate groups. The beaches are good but the restaurant and rooms are closed-in air-con-style and thus short on sea breezes. Expect karaoke on weekends.

PULAU RAWA

☎07

Edged by a fine white-sand beach, and luring bands of sunseekers, surfers and snorkellers, the tiny island of Rawa pokes out of the sea 16km from Mersing. Both resorts arrange transport for guests or you can try

to hop on one of their boats for a day trip for RM60 per person.

Sleeping

Rawa's two resorts are right next to each other on one of the prettiest beaches in the Seribu Archipelago. Think sugary white sand leading to a bowl of perfect blue.

Rawa Island Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎799 1204; www.rawaislandresort.com; 1-night packages incl full board & boat transfers per person RM380-1170; 🍴🛏) The island's main resort has basic, ageing accommodation scattered over the hillsides and on the beachfront. But you won't be indoors. This is a lively, family-style heaven with peddle boats, a trampoline and a huge waterslide (not functioning when we passed). There's also a restaurant, dive centre and a wide range of facilities and activities.

Alang's Rawa Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎012-715 5547; www.alangsrawa.com; two-night package per person incl meals & transfers from RM450) Cheerful white huts with sky-blue shutters line the best part of the beach for a perfect do-nothing escape. Service is non-existent and the cafe where meals are served is teeming with old drunk Chinese men – but in this setting, who cares?

PULAU AUR, PULAU DAYANG & PULAU PEMANGGIL

☎07

These three islands are so far from the mainland (four to six hours by boat) that you'll need to devote a few days here to make it worth the trip. In fact, you may not be able to get here at all outside weekends and holidays when the resorts run boats to pick up groups of Singaporean divers.

Eighty kilometres from the mainland, Pulau Aur has crystal-clear azure water, excellent coral and a few wrecks off the coast. **Diver's Lodge** (3-day/2-night dive packages from S\$365), bookable through Singaporean dive tour operators (try www.friendlywaters.com.sg) is where most folks go, although there's not much of a beach.

About 300 beds are available on Pulau Dayang, across the channel from Pulau Aur, at the scenic beach at **Dayang Blues Resort** (☎65-6536 6532; www.dayangnow.com; 1-night packages from S\$380) in Kampung Pasir Putih.

Forty-five kilometres east of Mersing, beautiful Pulau Pemanggil supports a sparse

population. Needless to say, the water is beautiful. **Lanting Resort** (☎799 3793; www.lantingresort.com.my; 3-day/2-night package RM298) has a variety of chalet, longhouse and suite accommodation, and offers lots of fishing adventures in a rustic, family-run setting.

Endau-Rompin National Park

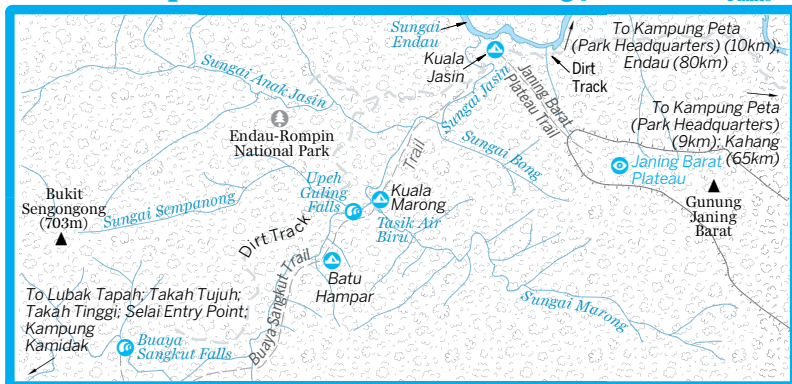
Endau-Rompin National Park is that pristine, waterfall-laden jungle teeming with animals which comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'deep Malaysian interior'. Straddling the Johor-Pahang border, the 260-million-year-old, 870-sq-km park is the second-largest one on the peninsula after the much more developed Taman Negara. In fact, there are few trails in Endau-Rompin so exploration is limited, but what you can see is spectacular. The park's lowland forests are among the last in Peninsular Malaysia and have been identified as harbouring unique varieties of plant life including enormous umbrella palms, with their characteristic fan-shaped leaves, and *Livistona endanensis*, a species of palm with serrated circular leaves.

The park is also Malaysia's last refuge of Sumatran rhinoceros and tigers, although these roam only within the park's remote areas. Herds of elephants are sometimes spotted near Kampung Peta around sunset. The park's birds include red jungle fowl, the black hornbill and the grey wagtail. Monkeys cackle in the trees.

The majority of travellers arrive on tours arranged by private operators but it's just as easy (and less expensive) to organise a trip through the park itself. A good first stop is the **Johor National Parks Corporation** (www.johorparks.johordt.gov.my; Jln Sulaiman, Mersing; ☎8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) office in Mersing, who can help you get in touch with the appropriate park office.

There are two main entry ways to the park, the principal one at Kampung Peta accessed from Kahang and a less developed one at Selai which is about a 40-minute drive from the town of Bekok. No trails link the two areas so you have to choose to base yourself at one or the other. A third, less used entry is in Pahang province 26km from Kuala Rompin and is not managed by the Johor Parks Corporation.

Endau-Rompin National Park



GUIDES

Officials of the Johor National Parks Corporation generally require that you hire a guide to explore the park. Guides can be hired for RM60 per day at the park headquarters at Kampung Peta, or at the Selai office, and are usually Orang Asli who come from the nearby villages and who have grown up in these jungles. A conservation fee (RM20) is also required.

KAMPUNG PETA ENTRANCE

The park office and lodging here is located right next to a charming Orang Asli village whose residents often give demonstrations on local games (mostly puzzles – get ready to use your brain) and animal trapping techniques. It's a lush setting, a short walk from the river. To start walks you'll need to take a scenic boat trip about a half hour up river (RM140 for up to 10 people) – from here it's about a half-hour walk to **Kuala Jasin base camp** from where all the trails lead. To organise lodging and activities from this entrance, call the **Endau-Rompin Peta Office** (☎888 2812; 11 Jln Bawall, Kahang).

UPEH GULUNG & BUAYA SANGKUT FALLS

The main walk in the park follows the Sungai Jasin from Kuala Jasin base camp. On a one-day walk you'll go to multitiered **Upeh Gulung Falls**, which is an easy, mostly flat walk with a few river crossings through pristine jungle. There's a nice leech-free picnic spot on a rock facing the falls.

For a two-day trek you'll continue for another 40 minutes to the flat rocks and camp site of **Batu Hampar**. It's about 4km of a

challenging uphill slog over several ridges from Batu Hampar to the top of the falls (a 40m drop) at Buaya Sangkut. Because the path is quite faint, only attempt this hike with a guide.

On the way back from one or two-day treks, most people stop for a swim at **Tasik Air Biru**, a bright blue, clear and refreshing swimming hole a few minutes walk from Kuala Jasin base camp.

SELAI ENTRANCE

Selai has far less facilities than Kampung Peta – most notably, there's no canteen so you have to bring your own food. Treks from Lubuk Taphah base camp in the west of the park follow the Sungai Selai to explore the many waterfalls along the river. To organise a trip from this entrance directly through the park, call the **Endau-Rompin Selai Office** (☎922 2875; 8 Jln Satrio 1, Bekok).

TAKAH BERANGIN & TAKAH PANDAN FALLS

About a 1.5 hour walk from base camp up a steep hill you'll reach the tall, single-drop Taka Beringin Falls where you can plop in for a dip and some body pummelling from the rapids. Thirty minutes on from here are the tall and slender Takah Pandan Falls where you can dive into a much calmer pool (around 2m deep).

TAKAH TINGGI FALLS

From base camp at the parks office, trek about 1.5 hours along a good trail to the roaring, low-slung Takah Tinggi Falls. Along the way you'll cross a few suspension bridges.

ON THE TRAIL OF JOHOR'S SNAGGLE-TOOTHED GHOST

Johor's famed *hantu jarang gigi* (snaggle-toothed ghost) is a tall, hairy, camera-shy biped that's possibly stuck in the same evolutionary cul-de-sac as the yeti or sasquatch. The primate has been tracked unsuccessfully for decades, with regular Orang Asli sightings of the 3m-tall brown-haired 'missing link' – as well as discoveries of oversized footprints. A slew of sightings were reported in 2005 near a river in the jungle around Kota Tinggi, when an entire family of primates was reportedly glimpsed by labourers. This instigated a giant and unsuccessful hunt for the beasts in 2006 and since then there have been no reports.

So note: if you encounter a fugitive yeti-like creature stumbling from the bushes, have your camera ready – and *no sudden movements*.

Sleeping & Eating

There are fan dorms and chalets, in good condition, available in Kampung Peta (dorm bed RM25, chalet RM80 to RM150) and simple A-frames at Kuala Jasin. At Selai, simple chalet accommodation (from RM60) is available at Lubuk Tapah base camp. Kampung Peta has a canteen where three good Malaysian-style meals per day (including a packed lunch if you're hiking) cost RM37. There's no canteen at Selai but there are simple cooking facilities.

You can camp at designated sites for RM5 per person.

Getting There & Away

Unless you have your own 4WD getting to Endau Rompin will require you to either book a tour

(Mersing is a good place for this) or make arrangements independently through the park itself.

Kampung Peta

Take a bus to Kahang and ask to be let off at the park office. Call the **Endau-Rompin Peta Office** (☎888 2812) in advance to charter one of the park's 4WDs with a driver (RM370) from here. It's 56km of rough road through palm-oil plantations to Kampung Peta. At the time of writing the last half of this road from Kampung Peta was being paved which may make the journey cheaper and shorter in future.

Selai

Take a train to Kampung Bekok station. Call the **Endau-Rompin Selai Office** (☎922 2875) in advance to arrange a 4WD (RM120) pick up from here for the 45-minute drive over rough road to base camp.

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